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Theresa



# Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

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On April 27, 1978, a group of left-oriented urban intellectuals in Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, staged a coup that brought into being the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Although the new leadership insisted that it had risen from "the masses" and spoke with the voice of "the masses," their heavy-handed attempts to impose reforms on a predominately rural population that had traditionally resisted interference from central governments met with early dissent. Agrarian reforms imperilled the existing socio-economic framework within the society without providing viable replacements. Social reforms threatened to erode cherished cultural values, and the passage of power into the hands of detribalized outsiders was viewed as an intolerable intrusion into the closely knit, kin-related rural society.

As the rumblings of dissent flared into open conflict, the Kabul government reacted with harsh, repressive measures, alienating virtually every segment of the society. Religious, political, and intellectual elites were jailed or executed; ground attacks and aerial bombings destroyed villages and killed countless numbers of the rural population.

It is estimated that between 50,000 to 100,000 people disappeared or were eliminated in Afghan jails in the less than two-year period from April 1978 to December 1979. By the end of 1979, about 1,000 refugees were crossing into Pakistan every day.

The chaos created by the DRA's tactics prompted the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979. Subsequent regular, systematic Soviet ground and air offensives continued the deliberate large-scale devastation of the agricultural infrastructure, decimated livestock, and depopulated rural areas. In addition, during military operations launched by resistance fighters, large populations cut off from supplies had either to starve or leave. The resulting increase in the refugee flow peaked between January and June 1981 when an estimated 4,700 crossed the Pakistan border daily.[1] Many came in mass exoduses of several hundred tribally related extended lineages. Others came in small groups of kin-related families.

Since the inception, the exodus has ebbed and surged in response to Soviet offensives and/or the economic decline of areas. In 1987, arrivals averaged between 6-8,000 a month.

Thus, in 1987, while 115,000 Soviet troops continued to occupy Afghanistan, a country no larger than Texas or France, more than a third of its pre-coup population of approximately 15 million resided outside its borders in Pakistan (about 3.2 million), Iran (about 2 million), and elsewhere throughout the world. Of the world's 12 million refugees, almost half are Afghans, with Pakistan hosting the largest single refugee population in the world. The processes of rubbleization and migratory genocide, designed to deny the Afghan resistance fighters needed support, continue and promise to swell the refugee population throughout 1988.

In 1987, the war was tactically turned around, at least temporarily, with the introduction of shoulder-fired, ground-to-air missiles, the American Stingers, and the British Blow-pipes. The success of the Stingers forced the Soviets to rely more on high-altitude, carpet bombing and concentrated saturation of areas suspected of supporting the resistance fighters with long range ground-to-ground missiles and artillery. In November 1987, a jump in casualties caused further depopulation of those rural areas under assault.

Not all those forced to leave their homes have fled outside the borders of Afghanistan. About two million internal refugees are also displaced. Large numbers have streamed into Kabul, where the pre-coup population of 750,000 has more than doubled. Others have moved to mountain caves or neighboring valleys where they continue to support the resistance movement.

## Settlement Patterns

An estimated 85 percent of the registered refugees in Pakistan represent Sunni Pushtun and Baluch tribal groups who largely settled in the vicinity of related Pakistani Pushtun and Baluch groups speaking common languages. Sunni Nuristani, among the early arrivals, found refuge in the Northern Areas of Pakistan; Shia Hazara mostly resided in Baluchistan; and, since 1985, there has been a marked increase in Sunni non-Pushtun Tajik, Uzbak, and Turkmen ethnic groups from the northern areas of Afghanistan bordering Soviet Central Asia. Naturally, they have experienced greater adjustment problems. Probably about 90 percent of all groups have come from rural areas.

Registered refugees receiving rations live in 328 refugee villages (RVs) scattered mostly throughout the two Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan, Baluchistan (63 RV; 812,331 population), Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP; 153 RV; 1,288,248), and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs; 85 RV; 862,212), also on the Pakistan-Afghan border.[2] The overall ratio of refugees to local populations is one to six, but in some areas refugees outnumber the indigenous Pakistani villagers.[3]

Because of serious over-saturation in the NWFP and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, continued efforts were made throughout 1987 to register all new arrivals in 16 refugee villages

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(175,188 population) established in a Punjab district bordering the Northwest Frontier Province, but extreme heat and ethnolinguistic differences made this highly unpopular. In December 1986, one refugee village was established outside the large city of Karachi for 18,500 unregistered non-Pushtun refugees whose quarters were destroyed during a round up of smugglers and drug dealers, even though President Zia had publicly acknowledged that these refugees were not associated with such illegal activities. During 1987, they received ad hoc, phased assistance but authorities were reluctant to extend regular assistance for fear that this group, which had attained a high level of self-sufficiency through employment in Karachi's many industries, might develop a corrupting sense of dependency.

The refugee villages consist mostly of sun-dried, mud-brick housing, although thousands continue to dwell in tents. Populations range from small groupings of 5-8,000 to huge settlements of 120,000 covering five square miles. Each has a bazaar. Most notably, no fencing surrounds any of the villages, and the refugees are permitted to move freely throughout Pakistan to seek employment or more salubrious climates.[4] Many refugee villages cluster around Pakistani cities, and in some areas the refugees operate a good portion of the hotels, restaurants, food and textile shops, and transport services. In some of these areas, they have substantially enhanced the local economy.

Nevertheless, major refugee concentrations are for the most part situated in stark, ecologically fragile mountainous and desert areas that have been adversely affected by the introduction of such masses of people, plus the three million head of livestock accompanying them. To help offset these staggering pressures, the World Bank has initiated programs for road and water systems repairs, reforestation, and range management. Originally budgeted in 1982–85 for $20 million, this project's second phase foresees expenditures of $40 million. The remarkable fact that by June 1987 subscription for $38 million had been received speaks for its unique success.

## Assistance: Successes

Despite the crowded concentrations, assistance programs have not been plagued by negative factors frequently found in refugee situations. Most notably, by the end of 1987 there had been no major disruptions of the assistance distribution network, no epidemics, no starvation, little acute malnutrition, and no serious outbreaks of violence.

This has been due in great part to the commitment of the government of Pakistan and the international community, and to the Islamic injunction to succour other Muslims suffering from persecution. The *Pushtunwali*, Code of the Pushtun, which enjoins all Pushtun to aid fellow Pushtun, also enhanced the positive reception.

In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program, and a steadily growing number of bilateral and private voluntary organizations cooperated in providing food, shelter, medical, and educational assistance. In 1987, the Pakistani government's official list of voluntary agencies included 85 organizations maintaining offices and/or programs in Pakistan. They represented almost every country in Western Europe, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Pakistan, Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the Arab Middle East, Australia, Africa, South Korea, and Japan.

U.S. government contributions to Afghan relief programs from 1980-1987 totalled $534.8 million, including $51.5 pledged for FY 1987. Pakistan's financial summary for 1987–88 totals U.S. $362 million, which does not reflect considerable anticipated expenditures by the voluntary agencies.

Since 1985, the U.S. Congress has appropriated $53 million for cross-border humanitarian aid to meet medical, educational, food, and agricultural needs of internal refugees and civilian populations residing in liberated areas inside Afghanistan. These programs augment internal assistance provided since 1982 by the Swedish Committee and numbers of other West European groups. A media program seeks to provide Afghan refugees with expertise in presenting their cause to the outside world.

## Assistance: Problems

Initial emphasis on emergency relief shifted gradually to self-reliance programs and development-oriented schemes targeted to prepare for an eventual return of the refugees to Afghanistan. The latter assumed greater importance in 1987 after the DRA regime in Kabul launched a peace offensive in the spirit of "National Reconciliation" by declaring cease-fires, extending offers of amnesty, and assuring resistance leaders representation in a multi-party coalition government.[5] Though the sincerity of this campaign was questioned by most, even the remote possibility of repatriation prompted assistance planners to strengthen programs that would be of benefit in rebuilding Afghanistan.



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Because of such substantive programming, however, vulnerable groups tended to be overlooked. A social welfare component of UNHCR was consequently added in 1987 to make a systematic search of camps for widows, orphans, and destitute families who had fallen away from the traditional family and/or tribal support system and those among the 370,000 unregistered refu-

gees not entitled to rations who were unable to find support networks. Also, assistance to remote areas was less than adequate; the reception of new arrivals remained woefully inadequate.

Basic Health Units have been established in the refugee villages, with attendant potable water, sanitation, immunization, and malaria control programs. Epidemics have thus been avoided. In 1987, however, grave concerns arose regarding weakened nutrition among women of child-bearing age, about 22 percent of the refugee population. The birth rate was alarmingly high, with 418 live births per 1,000 women, and these women have subsisted on unbalanced ration diets for eight years. In addition to no spacing of pregnancies, they were not receiving the greater nutritional requirements pregnant and nursing mothers need. Thus, they were increasingly prone to giving birth prematurely, and many full-term babies were underweight. All these children were potentially vulnerable to a variety of mental and developmental problems. As a result, primary health education was being vigorously promoted, and women were encouraged to take advantage of services offered at Mother/Child Health Centers.



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Equally worrisome has been the lack of adequate higher education to provide skilled personnel capable of rebuilding Afghanistan. Most educated Afghans have gone abroad as soon as they possibly could, leaving a void in teaching resources for such programs. In addition, young Afghans consider joining the war of resistance as their most important option in life and are impatient with those who council the importance of education. To change such attitudes is difficult, and the expansion of secondary education facilities and post-twelfth-grade training programs were encouraging developments in 1987. Furthermore, many cross-border programs emphasized professional training in all fields so that young Afghans could provide services for the resistance, and, after repatriation, for the reconstruction of their devastated country.

For eight years, urban, middle class women have suffered from the strengthening of ultra-conservative Afghan attitudes, exacerbated by conservative Pakistani attitudes, denying them education and career opportunities. Emerging secondary education programs for these women have been heartening developments, for it seems the abruptly halted pre-1978 evolutionary emancipation movement might again be moving forward, albeit slowly. Still, a whole generation of professional women is in danger of being lost.

In the economic sphere, a wide range of programs were introduced in 1987, including radio and car repair apprenticeships/training. Construction projects provided training for civil engineers, electricians, masons, and carpenters, and small credit schemes enabled skilled Afghans to generate income for self-sufficiency. However, numbers of such business incentive programs, an ambitious credit banking project, and a much needed employment bureau were closed during the year at the insistence of the government. It was argued that such programs were discriminatory because nothing comparable existed for Pakistanis and that such schemes could be regarded as permanent enterprises, encouraging refugees to remain in Pakisan. Kitchen gardens, reforestation, dairy, poultry and beekeeping projects were acceptable, but a proposed truck farm designed to teach the next generation of Afghanistan's rural youth how to survive was vetoed because it could be conceived as giving away Pakistani land to foreigners. Therefore, the main thrust in 1987 was almost exclusively refugee village-oriented toward production of relief commodities and services.

## Relations with Pakistan

Possibly no such objections would have been voiced prior to 1987, but this past year witnessed a marked increase in the tendency of Pakistanis to blame the Afghans for all manner of social, economic, and political woes. There

had always been some resentment against the refugees among certain Pakistani groups, especially urban intellectuals living in cities far removed from large refugee concentrations. The leftist media in Lahore and Karachi had been particularly vocal. However, after President Zia ul-Haq lifted martial law and allowed political parties to resume activities, the opposition began to call increasingly for a revision of Pakistan's Afghan policy, specifically insisting on the return of the refugees.

The DRA government inflamed such prejudices by entertaining prominent Pakistani opposition politicians and holding well-publicized meetings of Pakistani tribal leaders in Kabul, supplying them with quantities of money, guns, and ammunition. In return, the leaders held meetings at home during which they called loudly, in fierce rhetoric, for the removal of all refugees from their territories.

The war had come to Pakistan with a vengeance, and public sentiment against the refugees deepened in 1987. Throughout the year, there was an alarming increase in bomb blasts set in crowded bazaars, bus stations, buses, and trains, locales where many civilians—including women and children, Pakistanis and Afghans—were wounded or killed. During the first eight months of 1987, a total of 135 incidents resulted in 199 killed and 669 wounded. Hundreds of unexploded bombs were seized, and explosions not causing injury mostly remained unreported.

Such terrorist activities, formerly confined to areas with large refugee concentrations, spread to all major cities of Pakistan during the year. Interestingly, no one took credit for any of the incidents, which allowed anyone to be blamed. Most often it was the Afghans, particularly infiltrating secret agents of KHAD, the Afghan equivalent of the KGB in Kabul. In fact, the first KHAD agents were convicted and sentenced in Pakistani courts in 1987.

During the same time period, air and ground violations of Pakistani territory also caused loss of property and were viewed as deliberate attempts to further destabilize Pakistan: 247 air violations killed 304 and wounded 536; 113 ground violations killed 28 and wounded 57. Air violations dropped off dramatically to only three during July and August, most probably the result of resistance successes with Stingers and Blow-pipe missiles.

The escalation of violence, which was



**Double amputee in Peshawar hospital. Many women and children are ... maimed.** L. Dupree

perceived—rightly or wrongly—to stem from the presence of the Afghan refugees, headed the virtually endless list of articulated complaints against them: drug trafficking; the corruption of Pakistan's moral fiber through the introduction of drugs and increased opportunities for bribery; harassment of women; the monopoly of transport services; rising rents; manipulation of the labor market; bizarre murders; the destruction of the environment; and the secret acquisition of Pakistani lands and businesses.

Many of these unfortunate, mostly erroneous characterizations rose from highly visible concentrations of unregistered Afghans living in cities where they have competed directly with Pakistanis in economic endeavors in order to survive. An estimated 2,000 live in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital. Afghans are overwhelming in their energy. They maximize every opportunity, and many have become emerging entrepreneurs. Pakistanis often feel threatened by such dynamism, and it is hard to persuade them that these Afghans represent a minuscule portion of the approximately 3.2 million registered Afghan community living in the refugee villages. Certainly, a good deal of the original spontaneous hospitality changed into a growing hostility in 1987.

Opponents also insisted that the refugees had received better medical, immunization, educational, housing, food, water, sanitation and other services than local populations. They claimed the refugees "had never had it so good" and raised the specter of the refugees settling permanently, thereby disturbing the demography of Pakistan by adding more Pushtun in the Northwest Frontier Province, which already demands more regional autonomy, by upsetting the delicate balance between Baluch and Pushtun in Baluchistan, which is already strained, and by intensifying traditional antagonisms between Sunni and Shia in other areas. During the summer of 1987, serious fighting broke out between Pakistani Shia and Sunni groups in the Kurram Agency, and the Afghan Sunni Pushtun were alleged to have contributed to the conflict. Roads were closed for long periods, disrupting the distribution of assistance service.

Opponents have made no mention of the advantages Pakistan derives from the presence of the refugees. These include jobs for a vastly extended bureaucracy; booming Pakistani relief-oriented businesses; and large, expensive, permanent water systems that provide for Pakistani settlements as well, and will continue to exist after the refugees leave.

Furthermore, some Pakistanis fear that should the refugees decide to stay, they will move from the economically unviable areas where they are now concentrated, and totally engulf the entire country.

No one who has seen the substandard housing, heard the harsh uncertainties of refugee life described, and felt the palpable longing to return to the homeland can doubt that the majority will return. A few will no doubt retain Pakistani business partnerships because future opportunities in Afghanistan will be uncertain for a long time. Such enterprises, however, would ultimately be of benefit in strengthening the entire region, economically and politically. Nevertheless, the likelihood that the bulk of the refugees will leave Pakistan is being seriously questioned by large numbers of Pakistanis, and this feeling fuels growing discontent.

The deterioration of good-will toward the refugees has been further eroded by the efforts of political opponents to use the refugee issue as a means to discredit the Pakistani government. They hold that the entry of the refugees has saved President Zia. Before the refugees arrived, they say, Zia was

looked upon as a military usurper, the murderer of his predecessor. Now he has been legitimized and is internationally acclaimed for his staunch humanitarian handling of the refugee situation. As a result, he receives all manner of aid, including access to sophisticated weaponry, thereby enhancing his political power. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the Zia government has been purposefully slow in finding a political solution for fear of losing this aid and international stature. They deplore Pakistan's perceived toadying to pressures from the United States. In other words, they aver that the Pakistani government's support for the refugees is purely political, having little to do with Islamic injunctions or humanitarian concerns.

Further, because opposition politicians believe the decision to accept responsibility for the refugees was mainly a short-term political act, they insist dangerous risk factors have gone unheeded. Various conventions concerning the conduct of refugees forbid them from undertaking subversive activities against their countries of origin. Yet, in Pakistan it is difficult to separate the refugees from the resistance fighters because male members of every family take turns providing for their families in Pakistan as refugees, and, inside Afghanistan, acting as resistance fighters.

This raises questions related to Pakistan's security. How, for instance, can a refugee's legitimate right to fight an invader be balanced against the obligation of a host country to ensure the safety of its citizens?

President Zia remains steadfast to both commitments, despite the anti-Afghan public opinion stirred up by the press and political parties. In truth, the opposition could do no less in the event they should come to power. The Afghans must find their own solution. No one can force the heavily armed Afghans to return to a hostile environment without subjecting Pakistan to even greater risks than are now involved.

And, it must be remembered that when the Afghans return home, they will once again be refugees in their own land, because of the ecological devastation brought on by the war.

1. World Food Programme. *Third Semi-Annual Report: January 1981 to 30 June 1981*. Islamabad, Pakistan: August 1981, p.1.

2. Chief Commissionerate Afghan Refugees, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 1987.

3. Dupree, Nancy Hatch. "The Demography of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan," chapter 18 in Hafiz Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*. New York; St. Martin's Press, 1987, pgs. 366-393.

4. Dupree, Nancy Hatch. "Dateline: North and South Waziristan: August 1987," in *Afghanistan Forum*, vol. xv:6, November 1987, pgs. 19-22, 16.

5. Dupree, Louis. "The Soviet Union and Afghanistan in 1987," in *Current History*, 1987, pgs. 333-335.



Afghan personnel are trained in primary health care to combat the high infant mortality rate. L. Dupree